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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 000167

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TAGS: [CM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: CAMEROON: AMBASSADOR ENGAGES ON CONSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE

REF: A. YAOUNDE 146

[1](#)B. YAOUNDE 121

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Hosting a February 5 public diplomacy event for leaders of Cameroonian civil society, Ambassador delivered remarks in which she encouraged open dialogue on the issue of changing Cameroon's constitution and stated USG opposition to amending executive term limits. She hosted a February 14 Embassy roundtable dialogue on the constitution and democracy, which gave a wide range of political party, NGO, academic and media contacts a chance to exchange views with senior members of the ruling CPDM party. The British have called for more dialogue and freedom of expression on the constitutional issue, while the President of Cameroon's main opposition SDF party has become more assertive in opposition to amending term limits and in favor of calling a constitutional convention. The Embassy's outreach over the past two weeks has put the USG up front in the ongoing debate on this issue, which continues to dominate domestic news. End summary.

The Change Speech

[1](#)2. (U) As reported reftels, Ambassador gave a widely publicized speech on February 5 entitled "The U.S. Election and Political Change". The speech used the occasion of a Super Tuesday TV-watching evening event to discuss the U.S. electoral process and U.S. democratic institutions, change in American society, change in the post-independence African context and, finally, change in Cameroon. Too many African countries had experienced the dominance of one party and/or one person in politics for too long, she said. Ambassador noted that Cameroon had made some positive changes in the past decade but also reflected on areas Cameroon could do better: its investment climate, governance and anti-corruption measures, strengthening democracy and creating the Electoral Commission ELECAM.

[1](#)3. (U) She then had the following to say about the Cameroon constitution:

Begin Text.

I look forward to your national dialogue on constitutional change as it plays out over the coming months or years. I know there are many issues you could discuss, including provisions for succession, a possible two-round ballot system, and other matters in addition to the question of term limits.

The United States position is clear -as I have said already - we acknowledge every country's right to change its constitution and in our experience term limits and periodic leadership change - at least every decade - are healthy for democracy. We have consistently spoken out against changing executive term limits in other countries, such as in Nigeria, and we would recommend against an effort to amend the constitution when such a move could be perceived as being for the benefit of one individual or group.

We believe the kind of very serious decisions involved in changing a constitution should be done through a national conversation in which the voice of every political party, every civil society and business organization, students, teachers, workers, journalists,- indeed every Cameroonian, to the extent possible - is heard on a matter of such vital importance. The result of such a dialogue would be a decision that all can accept and support, in peace and brotherhood - and sisterhood!

I was pleased when President Biya himself said recently that there are more important issues for his administration and the National Assembly to tackle in the immediate future -- issues like poverty reduction, improving the lives of Cameroonians in all ten provinces, rooting out corruption in public life, bringing education and health to all Cameroonians. The United States Government and the U.S. Embassy in Cameroon look forward with great eagerness to working with the people of Cameroon on these vital issues, and to listening in, as the Cameroonian people discuss the issue of constitutional change, prepare for the important presidential election three years away, and work in other ways to strengthen your democracy.

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End Text.

14. (U) As reported ref B, the speech received major headline media coverage. Most of the press praised Ambassador for speaking out on the issue, while the state-run media ignored the constitutional remarks in the speech and a small number of commentators criticized Ambassador for her perceived meddling in internal affairs.

The Constitutional Roundtable

15. (U) On February 14, the Ambassador hosted a two-hour roundtable of about 40 prominent politicians, NGO activists, academics, and journalists on the theme "The Constitution and Democracy in Cameroon". The event began with presentations from Deputy General Secretary of the ruling CPDM party Gregoire Owona, as well as from Titi Nwel, head of the Committee for Justice and Peace of the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, and Alain Didier Olinga, a prominent legal scholar from IRIC. Ambassador clarified that our only agenda was to promote dialogue and said she encouraged all to keep an open mind.

16. (U) Many around the table voiced frustration that a large number of the provisions in Cameroon's 1996 constitution had never been implemented, including provisions for the creation of a Senate, a Constitutional Council, and decentralization. It was therefore premature to consider new amendments, they argued, asserting that the government had not given a good reason to seek such a change.

17. (U) Some opined that the CPDM could not speak for the majority of Cameroonians, as it claimed to do. The editor of opposition newspaper Le Messenger cited a recent survey from his media outlet which found that 87% of those polled (75% of whom were CPDM members) opposed modifying the constitution. Many participants hoped the government would do more to listen to the people and encourage broad open dialogue on the

constitutional issue. Muslim and Christian religious leaders present urged debate, noting that dialogue was an integral part of traditional Cameroonian decisionmaking. Several women in the group said women had not been adequately consulted on constitutional change.

¶8. (U) Pauline Biyong, head of the League for Women and Children's Rights and an outspoken leader of the "Don't Touch My Constitution" campaign, said she would support changing the constitution, but not Article 6.2 (which limits the president to two terms). She thought Cameroon needed to focus on other priorities, as President Biya stated in his October 2007 France24 interview. CPDM official Charles Eyene, who has been critical of amending the constitution, also said he regretted his party's focus on the constitutional issue when there were other more pressing priorities, such as fighting corruption. He criticized what he saw as his party's gerontocracy, saying constitutional change benefited the old, not the youth.

¶9. (U) Anicet Ekane, leader of the opposition MANIDEM party, thought the constitution issue distracted from the more important question of succession to Biya. The lack of a succession plan held the "possible elements of destruction", he concluded. He also questioned why the Embassy was hosting the roundtable and inserting itself into an issue which touched on Cameroon's sovereignty. Paul Nkwi, an anthropologist from the University of Yaounde I agreed that "Biya doesn't have an exit plan". He hoped the President would halt efforts to amend Article 6.2, call a Constitutional Convention, and focus efforts on developing an exit plan that would burnish his legacy.

¶10. (U) Several participants had strong words for Biya. The Mayor of Foumban and UPC President Adamou Njoya said Biya was "confiscating power". Another participant said the CPDM was "usurping the power of the people", while another called Cameroon a "Republic of Rasputin, where intellectuals are used for political purposes". The Chairman of the Union of Cameroon Journalists Celestin Lingo said it was obvious Biya wanted to stay in power, which he argued did not reflect the will of the people.

¶11. (U) Former Minister and CPDM Central Committee member Pierre Moukoko Mbonjo responded that the CPDM had in the past consulted the people on constitutional issues, recounting a tripartite consultation process during the making of the 1996

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constitution. Deputy Secretary General of the CPDM (also Minister in Charge of Relations with Assemblies at the Presidency) Gregoire Owona noted that the CPDM had in the 2007 elections increased its already substantial majority in parliament; it could therefore claim to speak for the majority of the people. He noted that the president and parliament have the legal authority to change the constitution. Cameroon had amended the constitution before to reflect political changes and other countries (including the United States) had amended their constitutions, he said. Furthermore, some aspects of the 1996 constitution did not make sense and needed to be "modernized" for the benefit of the country, he argued. Nonetheless, he reiterated that "we have listened" and said the government was open to debate. As noted ref B, Owona also remarked in radio interviews over the past week that Cameroon was a sovereign country and had no lessons to receive from the U.S., adding that the U.S. had amended its constitution several times, not through a referendum.

Other Voices

¶12. (SBU) Over the past week, others have spoken out on Cameroon's constitutional debate. The British High Commissioner shared February 6 remarks by Lord Malloch-Brown, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office,

stating that the UK government encouraged Cameroonian authorities to allow "a full, free and fair debate about altering the constitution", including freedom of expression and assembly for opposition elements. The Canadian High Commissioner spoke in a radio interview in the past few days about the fact that constitutional change in Canada involves significant debate in an inclusive process. We understand that the EU is preparing a demarche on the constitutional issue which will also encourage broad dialogue and may support the concept of periodic leadership change.

¶13. (U) At a February 13 press conference in Douala, SDF Chairman John Fru Ndi called on Cameroonians to rally behind the SDF in opposing the cancellation of term limits in the constitution. If the government wants to pursue constitutional change, it should call a Constitutional Convention, Fru Ndi said, in a message markedly more assertive than his previous equivocation on the topic. After his press conference, Douala SDF Chairman Jean Michel Nintcheau led approximately 300 supporters in a demonstration in defiance of the Governor's ban on such marches; according to press reports, the demonstration was quickly stopped by armed security forces using tear gas and batons, resulting in some injuries. There have also reportedly been other small demonstrations elsewhere in the country over the past few days.

Comment

¶14. (C) The Ambassador's speech and roundtable put the USG in a forward leaning position on the constitutional debate in Cameroon. While most of the reaction we have seen has been supportive, we would not be surprised to see some negative fallout from the government, at least in the short term. The roundtable has received some local media coverage and we have begun to receive inquiries about it. Some civil society and opposition party participants in the roundtable have asked us to sponsor more such discussions; we will first assess the impact of our efforts over the past few weeks and where we go from here. At the least, we have helped boost the morale of a timid opposition, gotten senior government officials to listen more to alternative views, and, we believe, done the right thing by going on record in favor of more democratic openness.

GARVEY